

## Conference Paper

# Tamanyan's Yerevan Between Constructivism and Stalin Era Architecture

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## Abstract

Aleksander Tamanian (1878-1936) planned to raise a core cultural building, the People's House, in the center of Yerevan. He wanted to create it in the form of a temple, which would mark the spot where in ancient times allegedly stood a pagan temple of song. The project and construction of the People's House faced many attacks from the proletarian architects who followed constructivist architectural ideas and were presenting, using V. Paperny's terminology, the revolutionary and egalitarian Culture One. In early 1930s, a new style of Stalin era architecture, representing Culture Two, replaced Culture One. In the 1934 project version, Tamanian's People's House was influenced by this hierarchical and vertical worldview. However, after the death of the architect in 1936, his son continued his father's grand construction, depriving it of Stalin era architecture characteristics. His further edition of father's project gave the city the core building of the Opera and Ballet Theater, the most telling sample of Tamanian's Culture Two, which differs and actually precedes the Stalin era Culture Two.

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Received: 26 April 2018

Accepted: 25 May 2018

Published: 7 June 2018

Publishing services provided by  
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the ISPS Convention 2017 Conference Committee.

**Keywords:** Aleksander Tamanian, People's House, Culture One, Culture Two, Stalin era architecture

## 1. Introduction

Sometimes the architect like a demiurge strives to create exceedingly comfortable buildings or even entire cities. However often his successors, editors and even those for whom these constructions were intended transform them into something less utopian than the original project was proposing. This happened with Yerevan, which Aleksander Tamanian planned as a small harmonic garden-city with a hundred and fifty thousand population, which turned into an urbanistic monster with population exceeding one million by the end of 1980s, which swallowed the tiny accurate city imagined by Tamanian.

In other cases, however, the ideas of the architect, that were distorted by the builders and the subsequent generations, suddenly come to life and the role that the

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architect originally intended for those buildings plays out in a completely different way. This was the case with one of the most significant works realized by Aleksander Tamanian – The Opera and Ballet Theater. We will demonstrate the transformations of Aleksander Tamanian’s Yerevan on the case study of this construction – we will trace back the architect’s original idea of this building, discuss the difficulties and temptations it overcame, and the editor’s role in its final transformation.

## 1.1. Methods

To understand Tamanian’s creative enigma we will use the concepts of Culture One and Culture Two proposed by Vladimir Paperny (2006). Culture One, which was typical for 1920s, reflects the revolutionary trend of egalitarianism and equality. A distinctive of this Culture is also the revolutionary principle of refuting the past. These two main principles determine architectural manifestations of Culture One: expansion (spreading), horizontality and egalitarianism. Egalitarian Culture One in the early 1930s was substituted by the hierarchic Culture Two. This does not imply that the egalitarian ideology of the previous period was revisited, after all the communist future was based on that very principle. Simply the ideal of Culture One was postponed to an indefinite future ([8], 146). Meanwhile, in contrast with Culture One, with its horizontality, symmetry, ability to spread and overall mobility, Culture Two manifests as vertical, hierarchic, rigid and static ([8], 141-42). If Culture One is oriented only towards the future, Culture Two casts a glance also into the past.

## 2. People’s House of Aleksander Tamanian: Case Study and Discussion

### 2.1. Temple of song, people’s house, and forges of proletarian culture

The Opera and Ballet Theater is indeed one of Tamanian’s most enigmatic buildings. It reflects the perceptions of the architect of the mystic connection between space and its historical and cultural roots. Tamanian was convinced that in the site where he wanted to realize his colossal idea, in the very place where at that time was the Gethsemane Chapel, two thousand years ago stood a pagan temple of song. He shared this belief with the painter Martiros Saryan when he just started the realization of construction of the People’s House – the future Opera and Ballet Theater ([5], 270-271, note 76).

It remains unclear where the architect's conviction comes from. In any case, until now there is no reliable evidence to support that idea ([3], 16). It is surprising, that in 1930 when the foundation of the building was being dug Tamanian did not even attempt to verify his theory by conducting archaeological research, given also that at that time (1923-1933) he was the head of the State Committee for the Preservation of Antiquities. Only one accidental finding traced back to the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. was studied. As for a systematic study of that territory it was hardly the case, considering that in order to facilitate earth works Tamanian even resorted to implosions ([10], № 379).

Tamanian's conviction must have been so profound that he demolished the above-mentioned Gethsemane Chapel that dated back to the 12-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is true that after the devastating earthquake of 1679 the reconstructed Chapel was very modest, but it seems that Tamanian was not driven either by aesthetic or anti-religious motives. At first sight, it indeed seems that the church destruction activities of Tamanian were conditioned by the overall anti-religious Soviet campaign. However, based on his overall approach to religious buildings on the territory of Yerevan, it can be stated that he was not at all favouring the demolition of churches (unless of course they hindered his vision of Yerevan). As with the Gethsemane Chapel, no archaeological research or control was in place also during the 1931 demolition of St. Paul and Peter Church that was in the place of the present day "Moscow" cinema, despite the rich archaeological material that was coming out from under the St. Paul and Peter Church, which archaeologist Ashkharhbek Kalantar rightfully considered remnants of an early, probably Urartian temple and which were carelessly destroyed [4].

Tamanian's "indifference" to the specific past period, perhaps, reflected his preference of stylized retrospective view on imaginary past to the reconstruction based on a detailed archaeological and architectural study of the past. His goal was to build the new Soviet temple of song and dance in accordance with the imagined prototype of the pagan temple and on the same spot.

One may assume that Tamanian preferred pagan architecture and realia to the Christian ones, but he was criticized just for realizing church construction instead of the civil one. Incidentally, there is a number of rather explicit details and structural similarities between the Opera building and the Zvartnots temple (7<sup>th</sup> century). However, we shall return to this discussion below.

To have a better understanding and overall to grasp the essence of Tamanian's work and legacy, both the architect and his work should be viewed in the larger Soviet and Soviet Armenian context. Tamanian saw his Opera and Ballet Theater in the

image of a People's House, the name of which already reveals architect's perception of the new "temple". It is not by accident, that the opponents of the project – younger architects, mainly criticized him for the word "people's" in the title. "The term "People's House" itself in the time of the dictatorship of the proletariat sounds as an astounding anachronism, which is automatically transferred from the old days into our times. Loyal to the commandments of the past, the project of academician Tamanov [the Russian version of the last name Tamanian] neither by its objective, nor by its content differs from those houses, that under the name of "People's houses" were being built in Tsarist times in different cities for the light entertainment of petty bourgeoisie (officers, artisans, elite workers). If there is difference, then only in the sense that the Yerevan People's House excels its predecessors in its external pretentiousness that by its type is closer to palaces. The plan of the "People's House" envisages only the existence of theater and concert halls and a museum, in other words, venues where the workers' role will be limited to the passive observing role of an audience". This is an excerpt from an open letter entitled "Instead of the "People's House" let us build a forge of proletarian culture", that in late 1920s was written and signed by members of the Proletarian Union of Architects that later were to become renowned architects Karo Halabian, Gevorg Kochar, Mikayel Mazmanian, Samvel Safarian and others (Novoye Vremya, 24 March 2016). Proletarian architects interpreted the term "people's" as "workers' " in the proletarian context. Whereas Tamanian's intention for the House of the People was much wider: for the "people" without class differentiation. The People's House was to consist of two parts: the winter part (closed) and the summer part (open), that were to have a common stage and would come together or separate from each other with a partition – a rising iron curtain ([10], № 360.10, № 361.1). Performances of chamber type (opera, ballet etc.) were supposed to take place in the closed venue, which is the current Opera and Ballet hall, whereas during mass festivals the iron partition would be raised (one of the constructive remnants of the curtain is the notably voluminous and high upper part of the current building), and the two spaces would join (there was also a plan for a mobile parterre and other unusual solutions, which, however, this time were criticised by the higher authorities out of constructive and financial considerations). Although Tamanian had the intention of building various buildings for cultural-educational purposes around the People's House, he was preparing the center of this area predominantly for a nationwide festival.

Proletarian architects' criticism of the People's House is important not only in order to understand the ideological situation in which Yerevan imagined by Tamanian was coming to life, but also, because the text of the criticism reveals a number of very

significant realities that were characteristic of those times, without which it would have been indeed very hard to understand the creativity of Tamanian and the building and the square that he created. It is characteristic, that the opponents juxtaposed the popular/people's festival with the everyday life of the people (the proletarians). According to them Tamanian's intention was to build a palace-like anachronistic building from the Tsarist past, while "currently all across the Union forges of proletarian culture are being built", where the builders of socialism will be forged. Hence, the proletarian architects urged not to allow the construction of the "People's House" according to the design of Tamanian. Instead, it was proposed to build "cultural centers that would organize the everyday socialist life of the new man". For the moment living aside the architectural disagreements and criticism expressed in the letter, that were directed against the eclectic and national stylistic solutions of the People's House, it is worth outlining one accusation, according to which Tamanian's People's House comes from the past, whereas the forges of culture of the proletarian architects are directed towards the future. The orientation towards the future of the proletarian architects is conditioned by their revolutionary stance, which does not recognize the past, intends to eliminate it in order to build the future. It is no accident, that in artistic circles such a revolutionary approach was especially close to the futurists, which is evident from their future-oriented tittle. It is not surprising, that some of the opposing proletarian architects, among which M. Mazmanian and K. Halabyan were adherents of the futuristic school ([9], ch. 10).

The creative activities of proletarian architects were obviously unfolding within Vladimir Paperny's Culture One [8], when the "forges of proletarian culture" mentioned in the letter were indeed being built all across the Soviet Union in the post-revolutionary 1920s.

## 2.2. Tamanian's culture two

Virtually, as we have mentioned, the proletarian architects opposing Tamanian were representing the common early-Soviet culture – Culture One. Their protest was against Tamanian's People's House as an attempt at recreating the denied past. But in the early 1930s egalitarian Culture One was substituted by the hierarchic Culture Two, which, in contrast with Culture One, manifests as vertical, hierarchic, rigid and static ([8], 141-142). While Culture One was oriented only towards the future, Culture Two casts a glance into the past [7].

The victory of this new ideological and aesthetic trend over its predecessor is expressly manifest in the spectre of 160 designs for the Moscow Palace of the Soviets about the construction of which was announced in 1931 ([6], Book 2, ch. 4.5), as well as in the winning project of B. Iofan. Later, V. Shchuko and V. Gelfreikh were assigned to join him to develop the final (although still draft) project, which was presented in 1934. It envisaged a monumental stair stepped (zikkurat type) 420 meter high building crowned by a 100 meter statue of Lenin. The Palace of the Soviets was built on the site of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was demolished in the early 1930s. Construction of the palace was thus perceived also as an ideological (and real-material) victory over religion that remained from the Tsarist times (compare to the completely different context of the demolition of the Gethsemane Chapel). That is to say, the retrospective glance of Culture Two was not directed towards the recent past: its chronological directionality is expressed through the reality that many of the projects submitted for the competition, including the winning project, in one way or another were reproducing colossal buildings of great powers of the past. It could be said that the competition was like a parade of imperial buildings, and not of Russian but of international historical origin – let us recall the zikkuratian characteristics of the winning project.

The construction started in the late thirties, however because of World War II and the post war devastation the project was stopped. There are also other rational and irrational interpretations of why the construction of the building was stopped ([8], 125). In any case, in 1960s the construction site was transformed into a swimming pool, and the gigantic palace into Stalinist skyscrapers built in different parts of Moscow. According to the felicitous characterisation of Paperny, the Palace of the Soviets that was to be built in the center of the world first collapsed turning into a ring of tall buildings, and spread outside Russia and even the Soviet Union (Warsaw and elsewhere) thus proclaiming a kind of a new “Hellenistic era” ([8], 135).

It would be natural to assume that Soviet Armenia hardly could have avoided part taking in Culture Two. However, interestingly, it was Tamanian’s People’s House that became the venue of expression of that culture. Remember that Tamanian started working on the project of the People’s House in 1926, i.e. before the competition for the projects of the Palace of the Soviets and still during the reign of Culture One. This is the reason why proletarian architects were protesting against him: they were within their own culture, “playing on their own field”. The era of Culture Two was not there yet, and they were fighting not against a representative of the new culture and ideology, but against someone who was recreating the denied past.

There can be an impression, that Tamanian was ahead of his time raising the issues of Culture Two while still being in Culture One. This is both true and not true. This is not true because Culture Two described by Paperny is identified with Stalinist architecture, while the initial project drawings of the People's House were not in any way connected to it. Moreover, the horizontal spreading of the building, the absence of hierarchic lodges and egalitarianism in festivals were indicative that Tamanian was closer to Culture One than his opponents. The reason for this, in my opinion, is that, as has already been mentioned, Tamanian was focusing on the festival, which in its spirit is closer to Culture One rather than Culture Two. Although, when the era of the latter arrived, Tamanian, too, was influenced by Stalinist Culture Two. The final version of the People's House that he conceived and which he completed in partnership with academician Eu. Lanseray is dated 1934. The previous design, that is closer to the current Opera house, was supplemented with vertical juts and crowned by Lenin's monument. The direct influence, if not the copying, of the Palace of the Soviets is apparent. With this version Tamanian actually illustrates that the wave of the new "Hellenism" described by Paperny had already reached Armenia.

However, surprisingly, Tamanian was at the same time a precursor of Culture Two in the era of Culture One. Proletarian architects were especially stressing the regressiveness of Tamanian and accusing him of advocating pre-revolutionary architectural values. Indeed, Tamanian's classicist style stands out even today, and for the revolutionary proletarian architects this should have been perceived as the reinstatement of the class foe in the egalitarian constructivist future that they were dreaming about.

In the creative self of Tamanian has one more important aspect, which made him a precursor of Culture Two. The thing is, that when building future Yerevan, Tamanian was looking back not at the recent past, as the proletarian architects believed, but at a far more distant past. That was the reason why he destroyed the Yerevan of yesterday, Gethemane, without even looking into the historical past of the destroyed buildings, which probably was the era of the alleged temple of song and love. This comes to prove, that his retrospective view was aimed at the ancient past that he had invented. Such an approach was one of the distinctive features of Culture Two. If Stalinist Culture Two was building its totalitarian, one can even say, imperial future by bringing together elements of past imperial constructs of mankind, Tamanian "compiled" his temple of song and dance from the elements of ancient Armenian church architecture. This is not simply another accusation of the opponents or a finding of researchers. When evaluating the 1929 competition project design, the corresponding Transcaucasus authorities have unequivocally characterized the solution for the facade of the building as old



Armenian, characteristic of the style of 5<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries ([10], № 349.2, № 358), and these centuries are famous exclusively for church construction. Together with the national architectural style, the eclecticism of the facade solution was also called into question, echoing the accusations of proletarian architects ([10], № 358). “As for the architectural design, it should be acknowledged, that indeed the author with great diligence and archeological precision restored old palace architecture spicing it up with church and feudal (according to the author “national”) and hellenistic vinigrette, mixed up with ampie” (Novoye Vremya, 24 March 2016). That is, Tamanian was introducing a kind of Culture Two, which was not connected with totalitarian worldview.

In any case, the project design of 1934 that was adapted to the totalitarian model made almost completely invisible the unique Tamanian Culture Two. However, before we discuss the destiny of that project design, it is worth focusing on yet another peculiarity of Tamanian’s People’s House that made it different from Stalinist Culture Two.

According to all the versions of the People’s House, it should consist of two parts – open and closed, which were supposed to become one during mass festivals. Tamanian was ensuring the “popular” aspect of the People’s House through the horizontal spreading, and the possibility of joining the open and closed spaces through various moving parts (the rising partition-curtain, moving parterre) that virtually were supposed to join the “outside” people with the “inside” people. It is no accident, that there was an opinion, that during big celebrations celebratory parades were supposed to pass through the People’s House greeted and hailed by the audience in the two joined parts. I don’t know if Tamanian indeed expressed this idea given that in the master plan of Yerevan there was another square designated for parades. However, the inventive way Tamanian proposed for the spatial “movements” of the people in that space seemed to be in harmony with the described festive passing through. Imagine, that, as intended by the author, the people were indeed supposed to pass through the building, it would mean that they would enter from the square adjacent to the building, then go on the stage, pass by the stage that would connect the two halls, i.e. for an instant would become the “performer”, through which the opposition of performers – spectators would disappear. This is characteristic of all carnival type festivals, which is brilliantly revealed in the Mikhail Bakhtin’s outstanding study of medieval European carnival [2].

The virtual passing through of the people in Tamanian’s 1920s design of the People’s House echoes the real passing through of the projects of Culture Two of the beginning of 1930s. In the initial version of Iofan’s winning design of the Palace of the Soviets of



February 1932 (as was the case with other similar projects) it was intended that the festive parade should pass through the main halls of the building: most probably that was a tribute to the trends of the egalitarian revolutionary Culture One. However, a special order that was released later that year put an end to the idea of celebratory passing through. Simultaneously, as a result of consultations during a party conference, M.Ginzburg who designed the theater that was supposed to be built in Sverdlovsk was obliged not only to abandon the idea of processions and military parades passing through the building but to add more lodges. Meanwhile, the theater projects of 1920s did not intend for any lodges at all. According to Paperny, these were signals that Culture One was being pushed out by Culture two ([8], 123).

Hence, it could be concluded that Tamanian's People's House, that had no lodges and was horizontally spread, due to which it became popular and penetrable, in terms of functionality was a vivid illustration of Culture One, while in terms of its exterior was closer to Culture Two. At the same time, the penetrability of the Palace of the Soviets was to be ensured through the entrance of the people – the passing through of the processions and military parades: in case the itinerary of the parades was altered, the building would be freed from the last signs of Culture One. Meanwhile, the People's House would ensure this penetrability by the structure of the building itself.

But let us return to the projects of the People's House of 1934 and the Palace of the Soviets that inspired it. The similar yet dramatically different fates of these two colossal projects are very important in terms of understanding Stalinist and Tamanian Culture Twos. As has already been mentioned, after the war in Moscow instead of one colossal building a number of skyscrapers were built, that first informally and now also almost formally are referred to as "Stalinist" buildings.

The last project of Tamanian also was left unrealized due to similar economic reasons: lack of resources, war etc. However in this case, as opposed to the Moscow example, there were also other determining factors, among which the death of the architect in 1936. Construction works of the People's House commenced in 1930 and the Theater section was built in 1939.

However, after the death of the architect, a new phase in the fate of the building started. This phase is a testimony of the crucial importance of an editor, even if we are dealing with creations of great architects. After the death of Tamanian, the building of the Opera and Ballet Theater was completed by his son Gevorg Tamanian in 1953. His editing efforts were primarily conditioned by limited resources. This assumption is backed by the fact that from the different designs for the building he chose his

father's most simple version, without decorative sculptures and, of course, without the expensive solutions of the 1934 design.

It should be taken into consideration that the post-war developments connected with the Palace of the Soviets were also realized by the representatives of Culture Two. For example, one of the authors of the building of the Moscow State University was the very same Iofan, that once won the competition for the design of the Palace of the Soviets. Meanwhile, the successor of Tamanian was attempting to get rid of Stalinist Culture Two elements. As a result of the interference of Gevorg Tamanian, the open hall was substituted by the current symmetric section of the philharmonic hall, and the two parts of the building were forever separated by a wall. Thus the building lost the penetrability intended by Tamanian, which in fact was an element coming from Culture One. On the other hand, the editor saved his father's building from the captivity of Stalinist Culture Two. As a result, we have a unique masterpiece of Tamanian Culture Two.

From a constructive perspective the son's editing deprived his father's building from the intended festivity: as has been mentioned, the two parts of the building were no longer connecting to organize mass festivals. Nonetheless, Tamanian's idea in fact did come to life in a completely different manner. This happened in 1988 when the Square of the Opera and Ballet Theater became the venue for non-stop mass demonstration, which directly or indirectly were connected politically with the Karabakh issue, but from anthropological perspective presented a kind of a festival [1], which the architect was foreseeing for his People's House.

### 3. Conclusion

Armenia, being a part of the Soviet space, underwent some general ideological and cultural trends. In 1920s, there was a visible Culture One (following V. Paperny's terminology), with its local specificities, but general egalitarian ideas presented in architecture by proletarian architects of constructivist orientation. They saw in Tamanian's core construction, the People's House, which developed later into the Opera and Ballet Theater, the eclectic view to the recent past, which they were eager to get rid of. They seemed to be right in their criticism, since Tamanian really dreamed to construct his People's House as a new Temple of Music, which would replace the imagined (and not reconstructed) ancient (and not recent) pagan temple of song once standing at the same spot. Actually he was using in 1920s the ideas of some specific Culture Two, and not the ones of the Stalin era Culture Two, which appeared only in early 1930s. At the

same time, presenting Culture Two in the vertical image of his building, he at the same time realized a specific horizontal image, which was close to the egalitarian worldview of Culture One, but in its carnival-type festival context.

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